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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Lebanon: Terrorist Use of Beirut International Airport\*

Beirut International Airport has been used by terrorists for many years as a transit point for travel, or as a site for terrorist activities or attacks. The available evidence indicates the airport has been used by a number of groups for various purposes.

- Radical Lebanese Shias use the airport for travel to and from Europe, and several hijackings have begun, ended, or passed through the airport.
- The majority of airport employees are Shia, and evidence indicates customs clerks, porters, and taxi cab drivers provide an "in place" kidnaping network for Shia groups hoping to abduct either foreign or Lebanese nationals going to or from the airport.
- Both pro and anti-Arafat Palestinian groups move personnel in and out of Lebanon via the airport. Until the 1982, Palestinian terrorists made extensive use of the airport to move materiel, as well as Palestinian and non-Palestinian personnel to and from Europe. Since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Palestinian use of the airport has declined but not ended.

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\*This memorandum was prepared by the Terrorism Analysis Branch, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division, Office of Global Issues and the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near East and South Asian Analysis, at the request of Ambassador Robert Oakley, Director, Office for Counter-Terrorism and Emergency Planning, Department of State. Information as of 21 June 1985 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcome and should be directed to Chief, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division [redacted]

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Intelligence Sources  
or Methods Involved

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- The Amal-affiliated Musa Sadr Brigade probably sends some of its operatives to Europe using the airport on missions to attack Libyan interests, and some of its hijackings have involved the airport.
- The Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Faction almost certainly has sent some of its operatives and materiel to Europe using the airport.
- Armenian terrorists have flown from Beirut to Europe where they conducted attacks on Turkish diplomatic facilities.

Airline hijackings involving the Beirut Airport have been a particular problem. Our records indicate 36 hijackings--almost 15 percent of all such incidents outside the United States since 1970--have begun, ended, or passed through the airport. The persistent use of Beirut Airport for at least 15 years indicates a chronic security problem exists. Various reports suggest that airport workers sympathetic to one or another terrorist group provide assistance to terrorists hoping to pass through the airport covertly. The collapse of Lebanese government authority in the last three years has only accentuated the longstanding problem.

At present, security at Beirut International Airport is practically nonexistent. The airport is surrounded by impoverished Shia Muslim neighborhoods in which pro-Iranian extremists operate virtually at will. The radical Hizballah organization is strong in most of the areas adjacent to the airport and, according to several sources, views the airport road as a place where foreigners and Lebanese Christians can easily be kidnaped.

The airport itself is under no central authority. Militiamen of various affiliations roam the passenger terminal, occasionally searching or robbing travelers. Firefights between rival militiamen have erupted in the airport several times, and airport employees have gone on strike repeatedly during the past two years to protest the dangerous working conditions.

In addition to chaotic security conditions that promote terrorism, the airport often becomes a victim in the Lebanese civil war. Shelling and mortar rounds from the surrounding war zone periodically impact within the airport perimeter, and the airport has been closed for much of the past year because of damaged runways.

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Selected Terrorist Activity Involving  
Beirut International Airport

9 June 1985 American University of Beirut official Thomas Sutherland was kidnaped by several carloads of gunmen after arriving at the airport.

23 May 1985 French journalist and researcher were kidnaped while heading into Beirut from the airport.

Fall 1984-1985 Fatah loyalists began re-entering Lebanon via airport. Airport personnel reportedly assisted Palestinian operatives entering and leaving Lebanon.

18 November 1984 Lebanese Shia terrorist carrying explosives in luggage arrested in Zurich after arriving from Beirut on Middle East Airlines flight. Terrorist was linked to seven Lebanese arrested in Rome on 24 November for conspiring to bomb the US Embassy.

25 August 1984 Large suitcase bomb defused at airport.

25 July 1983 Armenian terrorists flew from Beirut to Lisbon where they took part in seizure of Turkish Embassy.

February 1982 European dissidents traveled to Beirut for training in Palestinian camps. Numerous instances of such travel have been reported.

February 1980 Numerous members of Latin American insurgent groups spotted flying to Beirut for meetings and possible training with Palestinian groups.

6 May 1977 Norwegian arrested when explosives found in his luggage. Terrorist was en route to Frankfurt.

13 November 1975 Two Saiga terrorists held five personnel hostage at Pan Am hangar, demanding jeeps and trucks.

29 June 1975 A US businessmen kidnaped from cab en route from airport to downtown Beirut. Released four days later without money or passports.

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28 April 1973      Palestinians placed bomb in airport lavatory to force release of three terrorists arrested the day before for hijacking attempt at the airport.

5 October 1970      Forty-three Palestinian guerrillas held airport official hostage until guarantees received that they would not be forced to leave Lebanon.

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Hijackings Involving Beirut International Airport

14 June 1985 TWA flight from Athens to Rome diverted to Beirut after two Beirut-Algiers round-trips. Hizballah elements took control of operation in Beirut and as of 21 June continued to hold the remaining 40 passengers and crew hostage.

12 June 1985 A Palestinian protesting the hijacking of a Jordanian flight the day before seized a plane on a Beirut-Cyprus flight after it landed in Cyprus.

11 June 1985 Some six "Suicide Imam al-Sadr" hijackers stormed a Jordanian airliner at airport and diverted it to Cyprus, Italy, and back to Beirut before releasing the passengers and blowing up the plane.

1 April 1985 A lone gunman commandeers a Middle East Airlines flight from Beirut to Jidda. The plane continued to Jidda where the hijacker was persuaded to surrender.

23 February 1985 A Lebanese national, protesting the high cost of living, seized a plane on the ground in Beirut, flew to Larnaca, Cyprus and back to Beirut where he came under the protection of Walid Jumblatt. One person is killed and seven wounded in the incident.

7 February 1985 Group of Musa Sadr Shias briefly held a Cypriot airliner at airport. Demanded Cyprus release two colleagues held for earlier hijacking.

4 December 1984 The four hijackers of a Kuwaiti airliner from Dubai to Tehran began their mission from the Beirut airport. Two Americans killed in Tehran by the hijackers.

31 July 1984 Radical Shias diverted Air France flight from Frankfurt to Beirut before heading to Tehran.

21 July 1984 An Abu Dhabi-Beirut flight was hijacked by a Lebanese Shiite who demanded a press conference to speak against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

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24 February 1982 Musa Sadr terrorists commandeered a Kuwaiti Airliner plane in Beirut.

7 December 1981 Libyan flight from Zurich to Tripoli hijacked by Amal members demanding information concerning Musa Sadr. Plane forced to fly to Beirut, Athens, Rome and back to Beirut.

24 July 1980 Two Jordanians, attempting to collect a debt from a Kuwaiti merchant, hijacked a Kuwait Airways Beirut to Kuwait flight to Bahrain, then on to Tehran.

10 March 1980 A man with a toy pistol attempted to hijack an Amman to Beirut flight to focus attention on the Imam Musa Sadr's disappearance in Libya in 1978.

31 January 1980 Three Lebanese Shias armed with pistols and grenades arrested trying to board flight to Paris.

28 January 1980 Lone hijacker diverted Middle East Airlines flight leaving Baghdad to Beirut. Arrested by Lebanese authorities after he read statement about disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr.

18 January 1980 Shia gunman demanding the return of Imam Musa Sadr attempted to divert a Middle East Airlines flight to Tehran. During refueling in Beirut he surrendered to Lebanese authorities.

7 September 1979 An Alitalia Tehran to Rome flight was hijacked by three Lebanese Shia students demanding information on Imam Musa Sadr.

16 January 1979 Six Lebanese Shias demanding the release of Imam Musa Sadr hijacked a Middle East Airlines plane in Beirut and diverted it to Jordan and Cyprus.

6 May 1978 A Swiss woman planning to hijack a Zurich to Cairo flight was arrested after receiving explosives in the transit lounge. She had planned to demand the release of Palestinian terrorists.

8 July 1977 Six Palestinians demanding the release of 300 prisoners in Arab jails hijacked a British Midlands plane from Beirut to Kuwait.

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5 June 1977 Two Arabs hijacked a Middle East Airlines flight on route from Beirut to Baghdad. Plane landed in Kuwait where Kuwaiti commandos overpowered the hijackers.

19 March 1977 Two Turks diverted Turkish airliner on a domestic flight to Beirut and surrendered to authorities.

4 October 1975 Four Palestinian terrorists killed three and wounded 14 while trying to hijack a plane to Cairo.

15 March 1974 Six Arabs, reportedly belonging to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, were arrested attempting to smuggle weapons and explosives aboard a KLM flight in Beirut.

3 March 1974 Two men claiming membership in the Palestine Liberation Army and demanding the release of terrorists held in Athens hijacked a British Airways flight in Beirut and forced it to land in Amsterdam.

27 April 1973 Two Palestinian and one Lebanese terrorists about to board Air France flight to Nice arrested. Luggage found to contain explosives and timing devices.

29 October 1972 After departing Beirut, a Lufthansa flight was hijacked to Munich, Nicosia, Zagreb and Tripoli by two Palestinians who successfully demanded the release of the remaining members of the terrorist group that carried out the Munich massacre.

22 August 1972 A Beirut-Cairo flight was hijacked to Libya by Palestinian seeking political asylum.

4 October 1971 Two Fatah members unsuccessfully attempted to hijack a Beirut to Amman flight.

16 September 1971 An attempted hijacking of a Beirut to Amman flight by a Fatah member was prevented by Lebanese sky marshalls.

8 September 1971 A Fatah lieutenant was given political asylum in Libya after hijacking a Beirut to Amman flight.

10 September 1970 Three Arabs attempting to hijack a Beirut to Cairo flight were overpowered by security officers.

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- 9 September 1970      A Bombay to London flight was diverted to Beirut and then to Jordan by three Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine members demanding the release from prison of other members.
- 22 July 1970          A Beirut to Athens flight was hijacked by six members of the Palestine Popular Struggle Front who demanded the release of comrades in Greek jails.
- 22 June 1970          An Albanian-born American hijacked a Beirut-Rome-New York flight to Cairo to protest American imperialism in Vietnam.
- 9 January 1970        A lone gunman diverted a Paris to Rome flight to Beirut to protest American assistance to Israeli aggression.

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